Educational and Occupational Aspirations of Domestic and International University Students in the United States

Despina Hadjikyriakou

Hofstra University
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the differences between international and domestic students on educational and occupational aspirations. Participants included 24 international and 27 American undergraduate students at Hofstra University. The Educational and Occupational Aspirations Questionnaire was used to assess demographic information, educational and occupational aspirations of students, as well as the socioeconomic status of their families. Occupational aspirations and parents’ occupational prestige were quantified by using the Nakao-Treas Prestige Scores and Socioeconomic Indices (1994). No significant differences were found between American and international students with regards to aspirations, but American students were significantly more confident of attaining their educational goal than international students.
Educational and Occupational Aspirations of Domestic and International University Students in the United States

International students are an integral part of many American universities, a fact demonstrated by the existence of offices dealing specifically with international students on various campuses. Moreover, various American academic institutions report statistics on the number of international students and their countries of origin on their websites. The undertones of these reports indicate that diversity of the student body is often perceived as a positive feature of a university, since it enhances academic learning, especially liberal arts education, through the provision of alternative worldviews and life-perspectives by the international students.

Existing research on the factors affecting the educational and occupational aspirations of students is mainly concentrated on exploring either differences within the same racial or ethnic group, and thus investigating the effects of variables other than race and ethnicity, or in exploring differences between various minority and majority ethnic groups within a country. There is a considerable lack of research investigating the effects of race and ethnicity as correlates or predictors of educational and occupational aspirations of international students and their American citizen counterparts. Differences have been found between the educational and occupational aspirations of various ethnic groups in countries marked by heterogeneity of population (New Zealand, Australia, USA), but investigations of the differences between the aspirations of international students and American-citizen students are almost non-existent.

Previous literature has demonstrated that educational and occupational aspirations are related to an array of other variables including ethnic origin (Khallad, 2000) and race (Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000; Chung, Walkey & Bemak, 1997; Mau & Bikos, 2000), parental occupation (Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000), parental expectations (Chung, R.C.-Y., Walkey, H. F., & Bemak, F.
Educational and Occupational

, 1997), gender (Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000; Mau & Bikos, 2000), socioeconomic status (Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000), structural circumstances such as the social location of migrants in the host country and their desire for upward mobility (Chung, et al., 1997; Dandy & Nettelbeck, 2002), and cultural values (Chung, et al.; 1997, Dandy & Nettelbeck, 2002).

Khallad (2000) in a study comparing education and career aspirations of Palestinian and US public school students, found that more Palestinian than American students aspired to occupations of the highest levels, such as physician, engineer, and teacher.

In another study conducted by Dandy and Nettelbeck (2002), more Vietnamese Australian primary school students aspired to attend a university, compared with their Anglo-Celtic counterparts, although this difference was not significant. Moreover, in the same study, Vietnamese and Chinese Australian children were more likely to nominate higher status occupations than Anglo-Celtic Australian children. This was not the effect of higher educational or occupational status among Chinese and Vietnamese parents (Dandy & Nettelbeck, 2002).

Similar results were reported by Chung, et al. (1997), in a study comparing New Zealand Chinese and European public high school students. There was a significant difference in terms of educational expectations, which reflected parental expectations; more Chinese students intended to continue their education in a university, while European students tended to prefer other tertiary institutions (Chung, et al., 1997). Chinese students were more likely than European students to report occupational aspirations related to professional careers, while more European students were uncertain about their chosen occupations. These differences reflected parental expectations (Chung, et al., 1997).
Mau and Bikos (2000) also reported that race had an effect on aspirations of American sophomores and seniors, with Asian Americans having the higher college aspirations, and Hispanics having the lowest.

The present study aims to fill a gap in the literature on educational and occupational aspirations, by investigating the effects of ethnicity and citizenship on the educational and occupational aspirations of college students in the United States. The purpose of the study is specifically to explore and answer questions about the differences in the occupational and educational aspirations between international and domestic (American-citizen) undergraduate university students in the United States. Wahl and Blackhurst (2000) suggest that effective career-guidance programs should be responsive to cultural values, reject gender, race, culture and class-based stereotypes, and attempt to broaden students’ awareness of potential occupational choices. Therefore, findings of the present study may be used to create counseling programs adapted to the specific needs of each group of students studied.

The underlying belief of this study is that international students can be differentiated from American students, because of their shared common experiences as foreigners in the United States. As international students, they have to face similar problems, which are of no concern to American students (e.g., immigrant status and visa regulations). Moreover, international students in American universities often form heterogeneous communities and share the same physical spaces within universities (e.g., living in the same dormitories and eating together). However, the utmost difference between international and domestic students is the international students’ willingness to leave home and adjust to a foreign environment and set of values, which often are very different from their own. This fact alone may be enough to account for differences between their aspirations, in both educational and occupational terms, and those of American students,
and to allow researchers to treat them as a group. Based on the findings of previous research that race and ethnicity are related to educational and occupational aspirations, there is an expectation that significant differences will also be found between international and American students.

Method

Participants

Participants of the study were 24 international students and 27 American (domestic) undergraduate students currently enrolled at Hofstra University. Students with dual citizenship, or who were neither international nor American (American residents without an American citizenship) were not considered. International students were citizens of various countries around the world, such as Colombia, Peru, France, Greece, India, Japan, Korea, and The Netherlands. There was no student from Africa. The small number of students from each geographical area did allow for further investigation of regional differences. American students were not specifically asked for their place of origin within the United States.

Measures

The Educational and Occupational Aspirations Questionnaire (Appendix A), developed by Hadjikyriakou, was used to collect demographic data and to assess the educational and occupational aspirations of students, as well as the socioeconomic status of their families.

For the assessment of the socioeconomic status of the families, as well as for assessing the status assigned to the students’ aspired occupations, questionnaire responses were rated according to the Nakao-Treas Prestige Scores and Socioeconomic Indices (1994). In calculating a prestige score for occupational titles, Nakao and Treas followed the procedure used by the Hodge, Siegel and Rossi in the 1960’s. The interviewer asked each respondent to evaluate each occupation according to its social standing (Nakao & Treas, 1994). Respondents
were required to sort small cards with occupational titles into a cardboard sheet displaying a nine-rung ladder of social standing, ranging from 1 as the lowest possible social standing, to 9, as the highest possible (Nakao & Treas, 1994). With the use of a mathematical formula, Nakao and Treas converted the scores to 8 intervals of 12.5 points. The converted scores range from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest). The Nakao - Treas Scale also reported Socioeconomic Index (SEI) scores based on occupational characteristics of the total labor force, taking into account education and income. An advantage of the Nakao – Treas Scale is that it takes into account contemporary occupational evaluations (Nakao & Treas, 1994). Occupations like physician and lawyer scored on the highest ranks of the scale, while the title “housewife” scored in the mid-ranges.

For determining the validity of ethnicity as the grouping variable, the Stevenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS; Stephenson, 2000)) was used to compare international and American students. According to Stephenson (2000), assessment of acculturation requires measurement of identification with the society of origin, as well as with the dominant society. The SMAS is comprised by two subscales; Dominant Society Immersion (DSI) and Ethnic Society Immersion (ESI). On both scales items measure the domains of language, interaction, media, and food. (Stephenson, 2000) The general scale consists of 32 items, with 17 items belonging to the ESI subscale, and 15 items belonging to the DSI subscale. Both scales (DSI and ESI) have values ranging from one (showing the lowest degree of immersion) to four (showing the highest degree of immersion).

Procedure

Convenience sampling was utilized. Participants were recruited from various places within Hofstra University, such as outside of classrooms, in the Hofstra University cafeteria,
university events, and dormitories. Finding international students around the university campus was aided by the researcher’s familiarity with the community of international students at Hofstra University. All students were asked to sign the consent form (Appendix B), and were encouraged to ask for clarifications, when not sure about any items on the questionnaire.

**Design and Analysis**

The design used in this study is a Static Two Group Design. The two groups investigated were international and domestic (American) students at Hofstra University. The independent variable is citizenship and the primary dependent variables are educational and occupational aspirations.

The present study used a two independent sample F-test, performed separately for each one of the dependent variable (educational aspirations and occupational aspirations), to determine if there any significant differences between the aspirations of international, and domestic students.

**Results**

**Quantitative Data**

Before proceeding in any data analysis, the researcher, following Stephenson 2000, computed the reliability of the two subscales of the SMAS. ESI had a reliability of $\alpha=.93$, and DSI a reliability of $\alpha=.90$. As mentioned above the two scales measure respectively ethnic and dominant culture immersion.

Prior to the use of inferential statistics, the researcher looked for correlations between prestige scores and socioeconomic index scores of students’ occupational aspirations, as they were measured by the Nakao-Treas Prestige Scores and Socioeconomic Indices (1994). Since the two measures were highly correlated, $r(43) = .77, p<.05$, they were combined (averaged) into
a composite measure of students’ aspirations. The same procedure was followed for the mothers’ and fathers’ occupational prestige and socioeconomic index scores. Mothers’ and father’s occupational prestige scores and socioeconomic index scores were correlated respectively as follows: $r(35) = .86, p<.05,$ and $r(43) = .90, p<.05$.

To check for possible covariates, Pearson correlation coefficient analyses between two main dependent variables (occupational and educational aspirations) and gender, as well as GPA were conducted. No significant results were found, and therefore an analysis of covariance was not used between the dependent variables and the aforementioned variables.

To determine whether the grouping variable, namely citizenship, was valid, the researcher used the Stevenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS) to compare the two groups. It was found that international students scored minimally higher on the ESI Scale than American students, $F(1,49) = 3.64, p = 0.06,$ and that American Students scored higher on the DSI than international students, $F(1,49) = 78.1, p< .05$. This shows that there are some cultural differences between American and international students, as expected. It is also worth noting that there is a difference of variability between the two groups on each of the two scales. On the ethnic society immersion measure (ESI), American students demonstrate more variability than international students, while on the contrary international students demonstrate more variability on the domestic society measure (DSI).

Table 1

Ethnic Society Immersion (ESI) and Dominant Society Immersion (DSI) for International and American Students
The hypothesis of the study, that American students and international students are different with respect to the educational and occupational aspirations, was tested by means of an analysis of variance. No significant differences in occupational aspirations were found between American ($M=67.32$, $S.D. = 9.42$) and international students ($M=67.08$, $S.D. = 8.48$). Similarly, no significant differences were found with regards to educational aspirations of American ($M=1.80$, $S.D. = .80$) and international students ($M=1.96$, $S.D. = .69$).

However, significant differences were found between American and international students’ confidence in attaining the highest level of education they aspire to complete. American students ($M=3.75$, $SD=.58$) were significantly more confident than international students ($M=3.73$, $SD=.45$) in attaining their educational goal. $F(1,48) = 5.95$, $p<.05$.

Table 2

Educational and Occupational Aspirations of International and American Students
Educational and Occupational

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspiration</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>67.08</td>
<td>8.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>67.33</td>
<td>9.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>67.21</td>
<td>8.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exploratory Analysis of Secondary Results

It is noteworthy to mention that the composite measures of mothers’ socioeconomic index and prestige score did not correlate with fathers’ respective composite scores. An interesting finding of the present study is that mothers’ socioeconomic status was more correlated with students’ occupational aspirations ($r=0.26$) than with fathers’ socioeconomic status ($r=-0.02$). However, the difference between the Pearson correlation coefficients was not significant. ($Z=1.20, p=.11$)

An analysis of the responses of students pertaining to the problems students anticipate with regards to their aspired educational level and career choice reveal that a great amount of international students reported Visa-related problems as a possible impediment to fulfilling their educational goals.

Discussion

As evidenced from this study, international students were not significantly different from American students regarding their educational and occupational aspirations. On the other hand,
there was a significant difference in their confidence of attaining their educational goal. A secondary finding of the study is that mothers’ occupational prestige and socioeconomic index scores is somewhat more related to the students’ occupational aspirations than to the fathers’ respective score.

**Implications of findings**

The expected difference in aspirations between international and American students was not found, and this might be a Type II error. If the difference exists in the population, perhaps this sample was not representative of the population. It was almost impossible to obtain a random sample, especially of international students, since the International Students Office at Hofstra University was unable to provide the researcher with a comprehensive list of international students’ names, addresses and e-mails. Moreover, the fact that the researcher was familiar with some of the students might have provoked a non-sampling error related to the faking of responses.

Taking into consideration that international students are a diverse population, another factor that might have masked differences between international students and American students, is that some of the international students have higher aspirations than American students, while other international students have lower aspiration than Americans depending on the country or geopolitical area of origin. This reasoning is inconsistent with the rationale on which this study is based. This study treats international students as a homogeneous group with regards to aspirations.

The finding that American students are more confident when it comes to their educational aspirations is not surprising, especially when combined with the responses of students pertaining to the factors impeding their education. The new government measures against terrorism and in
particular the Patriot Act, are adversely affecting international students, who often face problems related to their Visa status. Moreover, the economic discrepancies between the USA and some other countries might impose financial difficulties to international students. Sociopolitical processes and conditions should be taken into account when dealing with international students from various countries.

Moreover, the secondary finding that mother’s occupational prestige accounts for more variance in the student’s occupational aspirations than father’s occupational prestige may be indicative of some developmental processes that want mothers to be more influential for their children’s future than fathers are. The results were not significant, and they do not allow for much discourse.

*Direction for future research*

Future replications of the study may need to use a random sampling technique, if that is possible. Future researchers may also chose to consider isolating the part of the study dealing with students’ confidence, and particularly study extensively the factors affecting it. Another consideration might be to use a bigger sample that allows for separate analyses of international students from various geopolitical areas. Finally, future researchers of a developmental orientation may consider studying the effects of mothers’, as well as fathers’, socioeconomic status on children’s aspirations.

Moreover, the questionnaire could ask questions about the reasons for choosing the particular University, or why choosing to study abroad (in the case of International students), and especially in the United States. Answers to these questions might throw some light to the socioeconomic and personal reasons that differentiate the particular sample from students at other American universities, or in the case of international students, about the reasons
differentiating them from other students in their home countries. A future study should focus more on the people, and ask more details about their lives, instead of focusing primarily on psychometric properties and statistics.
References


Appendix A

The Educational and Occupational Aspirations Questionnaire

Please complete the questionnaire only if you are an undergraduate student currently enrolled at Hofstra University!

Age: ___________                           Year of Birth: ______________

Gender:           Male                Female

Major: _______________________

What is your College Grade Point Average (GPA) _________

Country of birth: ________________________

Country of permanent residence:       __________________________

Are you an international student:          Yes   No

Are you an American citizen:               Yes                No

Which level of education do you aspire to attain?

  o  Bachelor’s – B.A.,  B.Sc., Other (please specify)_______

  o  Master’s Degree – M.A, M.S. M.B.A, M.S.W., M.F.A, Other(please specify______

  o  Doctorate – PhD., Psy.D. M.D., J.D., Other (please specify)_______

How confident are you of reaching the educational goal indicated above?

  o  Not at all confident

  o  Somehow not confident

  o  Somehow confident

  o  Very confident
Appendix A (Continued)

Please circle any specific reasons that you think might prevent you from achieving your educational goals:

- Visa Problems
- Financial Problems
- Parents
- Other reasons (please specify)

_____________________________________________

Which career would you like to enter when you finish your education?

_________________________________

If you think you will not be able to enter the career you listed above, please circle any reasons why that might be the case.

- I am not going to have enough education
- My family would not like it
- There might not be enough positions available in the job market
- I do not know the right people
- Other reasons (please specify) _______________________________

What do your parents do?

Please list your mother’s occupation: _________________________

Please list your father’s occupation: _________________________
Appendix B

Consent Form

This study investigates students’ aspirations. As a participant in this study you will be required to complete a questionnaire about your educational and occupational aspirations. You will also need to answer some questions about your self and your family pertaining to demographic data.

Your answers will be held in strict confidence, and you are not required to put your name on the questionnaire.

Please answer the questions honestly, and carefully, and ask the experimenter if you have any questions about any items on the questionnaire.

You are free to withdraw from the study any time you want. I am willing to discuss the results of the study after it is complete. If you want to know more about the results feel free to give me your e-mail, so I can send you more information about it.

Please sign at the bottom of this page. Do not write your name on any other page, and remember to answer each item on the questionnaire honestly.

Thank you for your help,

Despina Hadjikyriakou

Psychology Student - Hofstra University

I understand all the information given above and I agree to participate in this study.

Signature ____________________________

Date ________________________________